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ABSTRACT

This study examines data from several national polls about press coverage during the Watergate scandal, in order to assess the origins of press criticism. The polls were conducted between 28 September and 6 October 1973, during June 1974, and in August 1974. The data suggest that political variables--particularly support of Nixon, party affiliation, and ideology--were the most important determinants of press criticism during the Watergate period, and sociological and psychological variables were of lesser consequence. The study concludes that the press may be limited in its ability to criticize popular government and political leaders, fulfilling its role as governmental watchdog and protector of the public interest only when a popular political figure is a weak leader. (RL)

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Criticism of the Press:

Its Social, Psychological and Political Origins

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Criticism of the Press:

Its Social, Psychological and Political Origins

It is probably a truism that the press systems of modern societies are the products of current movements within the societies they serve as well as historical forces. Yet the dynamics of the relationship between popular support of the press and the functioning of that press system are not well understood. It is likely, however, that the press cannot function without some minimal level of public confidence.

The historical bases for the modern press systems have been identified by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, who argue that two major variants in press systems have existed for at least the last five centuries.[1] Modern communications was born into an authoritarian society, they have written, and an authoritarian philosophy has continued as the most widespread force shaping press systems to this day. A libertarian approach to the press, on the other hand, began to develop in the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe. It was nurtured by the political revolutions of the period and incorporates their populism.

The Siebert, Peterson and Schramm typology of press systems assumes the functionality of the press for the societies they serve--a linkage made explicit by functional theorists such as Lasswell[2], Wright[3], and others. The functionalists have attempted to inventory mass communications activities and thereby gain an understanding of the role of these activities in maintaining and modifying the social order. Wright, for example, has specified four major activities of the press: surveillance of the environment, interpretation and prescription of society's activities, transmission of culture, and entertainment.[4] Each is considered to serve some function for the larger social system.

The role of the press, the historical and functional analyses underscore, is not a static one. Changes in the technology of the press itself, the activities and structures of other institutions within the social fabric, and the needs of the social system itself change the communications system. Public opinion regarding the press, in this view, may set limitations on press performance.[5]

Support for the U.S. Press

In the U.S. public opinion in general is supportive of the principle of a free press. A survey of opinion polls from 1936 through 1970, for example, found that for the most part a majority of those surveyed supported various aspects of press freedom, such as the right to criticize government officials and decisions.[6] In practice, however, the people are fairly critical. A CBS poll in 1970 found only 42 per cent of the people felt the news media should have the right in peace time to report any story even if the government felt it harmful to the national interest. The number opposed was 55 per cent.[7] A Gallup poll in 1973 showed that only 39 per cent of the population said they had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of respect and confidence in newspapers.[8] A Harris poll in 1976 found that 24 per cent of those surveyed had "a great deal of confidence" in the press.[9] Television news received a 32 per cent mark in the Harris survey. A 1976 Gallup poll on honesty and ethical standards of various occupations showed 33 per cent of the people giving journalists a "very high" or "high" rating.[10]

Evidence of any change in evaluations of the press is limited. The Roper Organization has found that between 1959 and 1971, the number of people giving local newspapers an "excellent" or "good" rating in terms of performance dropped

from 64 per cent to 48 per cent.[11] By 1976, however, the press rating had climbed back to 59 per cent. Local television stations actually improved their ratings from 59 per cent to 70 per cent during the 1959 to 1976 period. The National Opinion Research Center General Social Surveys also suggest support for the press increased slightly in the 1970s. In 1973, 23 per cent of those interviewed said they had a "great deal of confidence" in people running the press. The figure was 28 per cent in 1976. There was no change in confidence in people running TV.[12]

Various other poll findings bolster the notion that support of the press is somewhat inconsistent and liable to fluctuate. Bower has found that slightly more than half of the population think people who report television news "give it straight." On the other hand only 41 per cent are satisfied with the amount of programming on social problems (27 per cent want more and 32 per cent want less), and 57 per cent think the coverage of the 1968 presidential campaign was "excellent" or "good."[13]

One of the most exhaustive studies of reactions to the press was conducted by Gallup during the height of the Nixon Administration attacks on the press.[14] While the percentage of those interviewed giving "excellent" or "good" ratings on "keeping people informed on important problems" was high (40 per cent for newspaper, 65 per cent for television news, 41 per cent for newsmagazines, and 59 per cent for radio news), some of the Nixon-Agnew criticism hit home. Roughly a third of those polled said the media were doing too little to present the administration's views. Forty-five per cent said the news out of Washington was slanted. And slightly less than a quarter of those interviewed said the media they used contained a liberal bias. A third of those interviewed agreed with the administration's view that there is too much power concentrated in the hands of a small group of men who direct radio and television news.[15]

The Press and Watergate

One of the difficulties in assessing the meaning of many of the polls on press evaluations is that they deal with platitudes or reified reactions of the public. Yet the media are, for the most part, local institutions. As such, they are variable in quality and subject to differing ratings. National polls on the media, as a consequence, may well be measuring reactions to quite different institutions operating within the larger social system. Questions about specific press behavior avoid this problem and can provide a clearer understanding of public acceptance of the assigned role of the press.

Several national polls conducted during the Watergate period provide data which come close to meeting this criterion. Because the scandal was covered for the most part by the national arms of the media--the major newspapers, which offer news services, the major wire services themselves, and the television and radio networks--individual variation in media performance is less of a problem.[16] In addition, the administration's reactions to the scandal as well as much of the national coverage itself tended to focus on the role of the press in uncovering the scandal.

An additional advantage of examining the public's reactions to press behavior during Watergate is that there is little doubt the press was performing an assigned role in uncovering the scandal. The importance of the press as a watchdog of government is a central element of much of the libertarianism theorizing.[17] Several of those theoreticians, such as Thomas Jefferson, also were central figures in the formation of the U.S. constitution.

The picture presented by the poll data isn't particularly supportive of the press, despite the feeling by many in the media that Watergate was one of the finest hours. In late August of 1973, after the major part of the Senate hearings, a Harris poll found that 66 per cent of the populace agreed that, had it not been for the press, the Watergate scandal wouldn't have been exposed. At the same time, 50 per cent of those surveyed said the press and television had given more attention to the scandal than it deserved. In July of 1974, shortly before Nixon's resignation, 47 per cent of those polled by Harris said that the president had been the victim of unfair attacks by the news media.[18]

Other polls tended to show the same pattern. Gallup found in June of 1974 that 44 per cent of those interviewed still felt the mass media were giving too much coverage to Watergate.[19] In August of that year, after the Nixon resignation, 24 per cent of those polled by Roper said the press looked bad in the Watergate affair.[20] In the 1974 election study conducted by the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan, 19 per cent of those interviewed said media coverage of Watergate was not very fair.[21]

Even the live broadcast of the Senate Watergate hearings by the television networks was criticized by a sizeable number of persons. A Roper survey in late September and early October of 1973 found that 32 per cent of those polled said the broadcasts had been a bad idea. Of this group, 69 per cent said they didn't want the hearings on television because they shouldn't be conducted in public.[22] Almost half of those surveyed in June of the following year said they didn't want impeachment hearings broadcast should it come to that.

Explanations for the Poll Findings

There are at least three possible origins of press criticism during the Watergate era. First, critics of the media may simply be those in a social position which puts them at odds with many of society's institutions. This is a sociological explanation for the poll findings. It argues that those at the bottom of the social ladder would be expected to criticize the media as an institution which has not served their social position well.

The second explanation is that the press critics may be alienated individuals drawn from various social strata who are cynics or critics at large. Their pessimism about life and the state of affairs has led them to criticize the media. This, then, is a psychological explanation of press criticism.

The third explanation is perhaps the most obvious. The press critics during the Watergate era might well be partisans unhappy with the attacks of the press on their leaders. This is a political explanation for the poll data.

One can take a reductionist point of view regarding these three explanations, arguing that the political stance is merely the concrete manifestation of the psychological and sociological positions. Such a view, however, ignores the potential independence of the positions. The sociological explanation, for example, argues that social position, not individual attitudes, is the important variable. The psychological explanation holds that general attitudes and orientations, not political ones, are determinants of press criticism. The reductionist position, then becomes empirically testable.

Polls Selected for Secondary Analysis

The raw poll findings provide few clues as to which of these three possible explanations of press criticism is most parsimonious. The responses to questions regarding press behavior during Watergate must be linked to relevant sociological, psychological and political variables to provide that answer.

To that end, an examination of the questionnaires used by Gallup, Harris and Roper during the Watergate years was undertaken to determine which organization included the best questions for such an analysis. Three Roper surveys were chosen. These are the only Roper data publicly available which include questions on press performance during Watergate.

The first Roper data file was the product of interviews with a national, modified probability sample of persons 18 years old or older conducted between September 28 and October 6, 1973. This was after the major portion of the Senate hearings had ended. A total of 1263 respondents were included in the data set.[23] The second data file included data on 1987 respondents interviewed in June of 1974, during the height of the Watergate period. Again, the sample was a national, modified probability one. The final data set was for interviews in August of 1974, immediately after the resignation of President Nixon. In this set, 2002 respondents were included; the sample was national and selected probabilistically.

September 28-October 6, 1973, Survey

The Roper survey conducted in late September and early October of 1973, after the major part of the Senate hearings had ended, included the following questions:

> The Watergate hearings have been shown fully on television. Do you think this has been a good idea, not a good idea, or don't you have any particular feeling one way or the other?
>
> (ASKED OF THOSE THINKING HEARINGS NOT A GOOD IDEA) Is that because you don't think the hearings should be conducted in public or because you'd rather see other things on television?

Almost 22 per cent of the Roper sample indicated they did not think the hearings a good idea specifically because they didn't think such proceedings should be public.

Together, these questions examine public support for a central role of the press--providing public access to governmental activities. They also center on the specific behavior of the media which probably, more than any other single activity, made Watergate the household word it remains today. Those 22 per cent of the sample became the focus of analyses of the 1973 data set.

Questions on the 1973 questionnaire were examined to determine what measures, if any, were likely to be functionally related to criticism of the media's role in making the Senate hearings public. Measures were grouped into three types, corresponding to the three possible explanations of press criticism posited. Measures were labeled sociological if, in general, they indicated the social position of the sample respondent. Variables were labeled psychological if they tapped the particular psychological state of the respondent. Political variables were those measures which dealt with the respondent's reaction to the political system or political leaders. These variables were the independent variables used in the analysis.

Sociological Variables

Interviewers rated the Socio-economic status of each respondent on the basis of observations and information obtained in the interview.

Education was measured via the following question:

> What was the last grade of regular school that you completed--not counting specialized schools like secretarial, art or trade schools?

Respondents also were asked to indicate the state of personal finances compared with a year earlier as follows:

> Taking all things into consideration, money you may have made or lost changes in your income, what you have done about savings or investments, your present-day living expenses--all considered--do you feel you are better off now than you were a year ago, worse off, or about the same?

Age of the respondent was coded into one of five categories.

Respondents were asked about their viewing of new television programs. Though it is somewhat unorthodox to consider this a sociological variable, it is so classified here because it provides some evidence of the position of the individual in the social setting. The specific question was:

> There are a number of new programs on TV this season. How many have you seen--quite a number, only some of them, very few of them, or none of them?

Psychological Variables

The respondent's feelings about the future were measured as follows:

> Now I'd like to ask you how you feel about the future. Considering everything, would you say you feel generally optimistic about the future of our country, or generally pessimistic, or that you're uncertain about our country's future?

The following question tapped feelings about the direction the country is moving in:

> Do you feel things in this country are generally going in the right direction today, or do you feel that things have pretty seriously gotten off on the wrong track?

Respondents were asked to indicate probable causes of some of the country's problems through the following question:

> Now here is a list of possible causes of some of our problems in this country. Would you call off the ones you think are the major causes of our problems today?

Checking of the following items was determined via item analysis to be related and is considered here to be an indicant of considering the country's problems as due to a moral decline: permissiveness in the courts; permissiveness of parents; selfishness, people not thinking of others; too much emphasis on money and materialism; and a let down in moral values. An index was formed by summing the number of checks.

Political Variables

The question on direction the country is moving in also included the following two items, considered to be indicants of thinking the country's problems due to leadership: lack of good leadership and wrongdoing in government. Responses to the two items were found to be related. A summed index was formed.

In addition, confidence in government leadership was measured as follows:

> Now, taking some specific aspects of our life, we'd like to know how confident you feel about them. Do you feel very confident, only fairly confident, or not at all confident that we can generally depend on what we are told by government leaders.

Political and social ideology was measured as follows:

> Now, thinking politically and socially, how would you describe your general outlook--as being very conservative, moderately conservative, middle-of-the-road, moderately liberal, or very liberal?

The ideology question was followed by one designed to tap party affiliation:

> Regardless of how you may have voted in the past, what do you usually consider yourself--a Democrat, a Republican, some other party, or what?

Finally, the questionnaire included the following item to measure support of Richard Nixon:

> How do you feel about President Nixon? At the present time, would you describe yourself as a strong Nixon supporter, a moderate Nixon supporter, a moderate critic of Nixon, or a strong critic of Nixon?

Results

In Table 1, the dependent measure is broken by each of the independent variables in order to get a look at the relative importance of each of the types of independent variables. The pattern which emerges is rather striking.

Of the sociological variables, only two, age and number of television programs seen, are significant using the Chi Square test, and none of the Cramer's V correlation coefficients are greater than $.10^{24}$ Two of the three psychological variables are significant at the .05 level, but only for the measure of perceptions of moral decline is the correlation coefficient over $.10^{25}$ There does seem to be some evidence those persons seeing moral decline are also critical of the press.

The political variables, by contrast, show rather marked relationships with the dependent variable. Those who see the country's problems as due to leadership, for example, tend to be those least critical of the press. Persons considering themselves to be conservative are more critical, as are the persons identifying with the Republican party. The strongest relationship is with the support of Nixon measure. Nixon's supporters are press critics.

The strength of the support of Nixon relationship to press criticism suggests that perhaps other relationships in Table 1 might be different had that measure been controlled. That, however, is not the case. Support of Nixon did not suppress other relationships, analyses not tabled here show. Nor did it explain away the relationships shown in Table 1.

June 1974 Survey

The June survey was conducted during a month of important developments in the final summer of Watergate. Perhaps the most important revelation was that Nixon had been named as an unindicted co-conspirator by the grand jury that had delivered the cover-up indictments. The story was broken on June 6 by the Los Angeles Times.

The June Roper Survey included two items dealing with the media:

> If there is a trial by the Senate, there is disagreement on the merits of whether to televise it or not. Some people favor the trial being carried on television because they say the American public has a right to see and hear what is brought out in the trial. Others are opposed because they say the atmosphere with TV cameras would prevent a fair trial. How do you feel--do you think a Senate trial of the President should or should not be carried on television?
>
> In the Watergate situation, do you feel the news media have generally been more considerate of the President than they should be because he is the president, or that they have been properly balanced in their coverage and treatment, or that they have been very unfair to him?

The items allow for two separate tests of the explanations of press criticism. The first variable is similar to the one in the 1973 survey. A surprising 49 per cent of those polled did not want the hearings public. The second extends the analyses to more specific questions about overall press performance during the scandal. Of those surveyed, 31 per cent said the media was unfair. Critics are defined as those not wanting the hearings public for the first set of analyses. In the second set of analyses, critics are those thinking the media treated Nixon unfairly.[26] The Cramer's V between the two measures of criticism is .29.

Sociological Variables

Socio-economic status, education and age were measured the same way as in the 1973 study.

Psychological Variables

Satisfaction with consumer goods was measured as follows:

> Now, here is a list of some different kinds of things most people buy or spend money for. Thinking of what you get for what you pay, would you read down that list and for each one tell me whether in most instances you get excellent value for the dollar, or good value, or only fair value for the dollar, or poor value for the dollar?

Items on the list included clothing, food stuffs, appliances, automobiles, prescription drugs and toiletries. Factor analyses showed no discernible pattern, so an index was formed by a simple summing of responses.

Political Variables

Satisfaction with the political system was measured as follows:

> I'd like to ask you about specific aspects of American life. First, our political system. Which of these descriptions do you feel best applies to our political system? Basically sound and essentially good. Basically sound but needs some improvement. Not too sound, needs many improvements. Basically unsound, needs fundamental overhauling.

Ideology and party affiliation were measured as in the 1973 survey.

Results

The crossbreaks for the two dependent variables are presented in Tables 2 and 3. Neither the sociological nor psychological variables show much of a relationship to press criticism in either Table 2 or Table 3. The three political measures all have correlations over .10.

Because support of Nixon was not included in this study, party affiliation was used as a control to determine if partisan attitude was suppressing relationships.[27] Party seemed to have no noticeable effect on the other relationships.

The comparability of findings in Tables 2 and 3 provides evidence criticism of the press was not media specific and supports the contention that the criticism of public hearings is related to other types of press criticism.

August 1974 Survey

In August of 1974, after Richard Nixon had resigned but before he was pardoned by Gerald Ford, the Roper Organization conducted its most detailed survey on Watergate. Included was the following question:

> Here is a list of individuals and groups that were involved in Watergate in one way or another. For each one, would you tell me if you think they looked quite good in the whole affair, or looked rather bad, or were somewhere in between?

Included on the list was the press, which 24 per cent of the people said looked bad during the Watergate scandal. The press question is somewhat comparable to the second question from the June 1974 survey, where 31 per cent said the media were very unfair. This overall evaluation of press behavior during Watergate serves as the dependent variable for analyses of the August data set.

Sociological Variables

Socio-economic status, education and age were measured as in the two earlier questionnaires.

Attention to news events was measured in the following way:

> Everyone is more interested in some things being carried in the news than others. To take some different kinds of examples--is news about (read each item from list) something you have recently been following fairly closely, or just following casually, or not paying much attention to?

Items on the list included news events such as the energy crisis, reports on business profits, stories on President Ford and his new administration, foreign news items, and political stories. A summed index of attention paid these items was formed.

Psychological Variables

Optimism about the future was measured in the August 1974 questionnaire through the following item:

> Which of the things on this list do you feel generally optimistic about as far as the future is concerned, which do you feel generally pessimistic about, and which do you feel uncertain about?

The list included: Our system of government and how well it works; moral and ethical standards in our country; the quality of life in the country; economic outlook; our ability to get along with other countries in the world. Factor analyses showed no interpretable pattern of responses, so the items were summed to form a single index.

Feelings about the likelihood of economic depression were measured in the following way:

> What do you think the chances are that in the next year or two this country will suffer a depression like the one in the 1930's--very likely, somewhat likely, somewhat unlikely, or very unlikely?

The August questionnaire included several questions on charitable organizations. One of them is particularly helpful in indexing the kind of suspicions respondents had about such societal groups. It asked:

> All organizations such as those we've been discussing have certain expenses they must cover in administration and other things before they can provide funds for their cause. In most charitable organizations, how much of the money raised through contributions would you think actually goes to the cause--less than one-quarter, or more like half, or more like three-quarters?

Political Variables

Willingness to run for public office was measured in the following way:

> People feel differently about running for or holding various kinds of political offices. If the opportunity arose, how willingly would you personally be to run for a place on the local city or town council--very willing, fairly willing, not very willing, or not at all willing to run?

Respondents also were asked about willingness to run for the state legislature, Congress and the Senate. Answers were summed to form an index.

Ideology, party affiliation and support of Nixon were measured as on the 1973 questionnaire.

In addition to the support question, a large number of related items were included on the August questionnaire.

> In considering whether Nixon should be removed from office, there were two decisions to make--whether the charges against him were serious enough and whether or not he was guilty of the charges. I want to ask you about both. First, do you feel the charges against him were extremely serious, quite serious, not too serious or not at all serious?
>
> Do you think he was clearly guilty of the more serious of the charges against him, probably guilty, probably not guilty, or definitely not guilty.
>
> Some people feel that former President Nixon should be vigorously prosecuted on the charges against him just as any citizen would be, and sent to jail if convicted or it will mean we have two standards of justice in this country. Others feel he has paid an extremely high penalty already by leaving the Presidency and no further action should be taken against him. Still others feel he should be prosecuted on at least some charges to establish his guilt or innocence and given a light or suspended sentence if found guilty. Do you think he should be prosecuted fully, prosecuted lightly, or not prosecuted at all?
>
> The week of August 5th was a momentous week. In a period of eight days, former President Nixon admitted he had not told everything he knew. He became the first President in history to resign from office. Gerald Ford was sworn in as President and he made his first two speeches to the nation. Some feel it was one of the darkest weeks in the country's history. Others feel it was the rebirth of the nation. Do you regard it as a black week or a bright week in our history?
>
> How do you feel about President Ford--at the present time, would you describe yourself as a strong Ford supporter, a moderate Ford supporter, a moderate critic of Ford, or a strong critic of Ford?
>
> We've heard a lot about honesty and dishonesty during the whole Watergate period. Do you think Gerald Ford is a very honest man, a reasonably honest man, not too honest, or not at all honest?

These measures are labeled descriptively in Table 4, which presents the findings for the analyses of the August 1974 data.

Results

As was true in the earlier tables, neither the sociological nor the psychological variables are strongly related to criticism of the press. Controlling for support of Nixon did not alter this conclusion.

While willingness to run for public office is not related to press criticism, ideology, party and support of Nixon show relationships comparable to those shown in earlier tables. The partisan nature of the press criticism is reinforced by examination of several of the other variables shown in Table 4. Those thinking the charges against Nixon were not serious as well as those thinking him not guilty of the charges were most likely to think the press looked bad in the Watergate affair. Those not wanting Nixon prosecuted as well as those thinking the week of resignation a black one in U.S. history also were most critical of the press.

There is some evidence in Table 4 that support of Nixon specifically rather than support of conservative or Republican candidates in general was the important determinant of press criticism. While those strongly supporting President Ford, for example, were more likely to be critics of the press than those less strong in their support, the relationship is not a particularly strong one. The same is true for the perceived honesty of Ford measure. In Table 4, as well as Table 1, the relationship between criticism of the press and the support of Nixon measure is stronger than the relationship between criticism and party affiliation.

The question used on the August 1974 questionnaire to elicit criticism or praise of the press also sought evaluations of other individuals and groups involved in Watergate. In order to get a better picture of the nature of press criticism, evaluations of these parties as well as the press are shown in Table 5.

Nixon, as would be expected, was most criticized, followed by the Republican Party and politicians, Nixon's lawyer James St. Clair, and the press. Least

criticized were the special prosecutor, the House Judiciary Committee, federal courts and the Senate Watergate committee.

A factor analysis of the responses to this question, however, shows that level of criticism doesn't tell the full story. Criticism of the press tends to be related to criticism (or support) of other prosecutors or investigators in the scandal. It is less well related to evaluation of the parties and professions, and negatively related to evaluation of Nixon and St. Clair.[28] In general, the press was thought of in somewhat the same way as the other investigators of the scandal, though it was given more negative ratings than the other investigating groups. The irony is that the press did the initial groundwork on Watergate, often prodding the other investigators of the scandal.

In order to further untangle the relationship between support of Nixon as an individual and support of him as a representative of the Republican Party and conservative causes, measures of these three variables were used in a regression analyses, shown in Table 6. Both the 1973 and August 1974 surveys were examined.

The findings for the two data sets are comparable. Support of Nixon, rather than support of party or ideology, continues to be the most important determinant of press criticism. Party and ideology each make a significant and almost equal contributions to explaining variance in the dependent variables. Nine per cent of the variance in the 1973 dependent variable and 17 per cent of the variance in the 1974 dependent variable are explained by these three variables.

Summary and Conclusions

Three variables stand out in these analyses as being the most important determinants of press criticism during the Watergate period. They are support of Nixon (average correlation of .30), party affiliation (average correlation of .18), and ideology (average correlation of .14). No other variables match in magnitude these relationships.

In fact, only one non-political variable has a correlation with any of the criticism variables exceeding our .10 cut off point. That correlation (between feeling the country's problems are due to a moral decline and criticism in the first data set) is only .11. While other variables do show significant (at .05 level) relationships (such as age in Tables 1 through 4 and SES in Tables 2 through 4, education in Tables 2 and 3), the magnitude of the relationships is not great.

The data, then, seem to argue that political variables, particularly attitudes regarding Nixon, party affiliation, and ideology, were the most important determinants of press criticism during the Watergate period. Sociological and non-political psychological variables seem to be of lesser consequence.

There is little evidence, however, that a reductionist stance fits the data. In general, the relationships of the sociological variables and the psychological variables with support of Nixon, party and ideology are not large. In fact, controlling for age and SES (the most consistent sociological predictors of criticism) in a regressional analysis similar to one presented in Table 6 does not appreciably alter the magnitude of the regression coefficients shown. Nor does it reduce significantly the contributions of age and SES.

And what is more important, the zero-order relationships shown in Tables 1 through 4 do not support such a reductionist interpretation. If sociological and psychological variables influenced criticism through the political variables, those sociological and psychological variables would still be expected to show relationships to criticism when the political variables are uncontrolled. That doesn't seem to be the case here.

The possibility exists, of course, that other sociological or psychological variables not measured in these data sets make a significant contribution to criticism. A variety of measure, however, were employed across the four replications (at three points in time) of the basic analyses. If sociological or psychological variables were of major significance, it would seem they would have emerged from at least one of these replications.

Perhaps the more important limitation results from the fact that the data come from only one period and deal exclusively with Watergate. The data deal with press performance regarding a specific story, thereby eliminating many problems of nonspecificity. But this attribute also means the conclusions may be temporally and topically bound.

Data from the General Social Survey conducted by NORC, however, suggest this isn't the case. These data, the only publicly available which deal with evaluations of the national press across even a short period of time, at least hint that there is a relationship between evaluation of the press and evaluation of national political leadership extending beyond Watergate.

If the inverse relationship between support of national leadership and evaluation of the press which surfaced in the Watergate analyses is a general one, the data presented in Figure 1 ought to show a relatively simple pattern. As evaluation of the leaders decreases, evaluation of the press should increase. And the reverse should be true.

Figure 1 shows the evaluation of the people running the executive branch of the federal government declined sharply during the 1973 through 1976 period. While the slope is not as striking, the evaluation of the press increased during this same period. It is worth noting, as well, that the evaluation of Congress shows the same pattern as that of the executive branch--a pattern opposite that of the press.

What is maybe even more striking in Figure 1 is the relative independence of the press evaluation, as well as those of the executive branch and Congress, of the evaluations of the other institutions. The dominant pattern in Figure 1 is for increased confidence in the institutions from 1973 to 1974, followed by a sharp decrease the following year, and an increase again from 1975 to 1976. Perhaps education and organized religion show this most clearly. The pattern for the press is quite different.

The Supreme Court and TV do show patterns similar to that of the press. The former may have gained from the Watergate period, just as the press seemed to gain from that experience. TV may have gained for the same reasons. The TV question is ambiguous, of course, because people in TV produce entertainment fare as well as news materials.

This finding of an inverse relationship between support of the press and evaluation of national leadership has important implications. To the extent the relationship holds over time (the four years examined here form a relatively short period), the data suggest the press may be limited in its ability to criticize popular government and political leaders.

If this is true, the press must investigate a popular leader slowly, much as it did during Watergate. The revelations must be used to erode support of that leader. For only when the leader is weak is the press able to play out fully its role as governmental watchdog and protector of the public interest.

Footnotes

[1]Frederick Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm, Four Theories of the Press (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956).

[2]Harold D. Lasswell, "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society," in L. Bryson (ed.) The Communication of Ideas (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948).

[3]Charles R. Wright, Mass Communication (New York: Random House, 1975).

[4]The first three activities are borrowed from Lasswell; the fourth was added by Wright.

[5]Frederick Siebert, Freedom of the Press in England 1476-1776 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1952), argues that press freedom generally decreases in times of social turmoil, presumably when public opinion supports such restrictions. This position has been supported by the work of Donald L. Shaw and Stephen W. Brauer, "Press Freedom and War Constraints: Case Testing Siebert's Proposition II," Journalism Quarterly, 46:243-54 (1969), and John D. Stevens, "Press and Community Toleration: Wisconsin in World War I," Journalism Quarterly, 46:255-59 (1969).

[6]Hazel Erskine, "The Polls: Opinion of the News Media," Public Opinion Quarterly, 34:630-43 (1970-71).

[7]Cited in Erskine, ibid. It is interesting to note that in the summer of 1971, prior to the Supreme Court's ruling in favor of the media in the Pentagon Papers case, 58 per cent of those polled by Gallup who knew of the case supported the press (Gallup Opinion Index, 74, August 1971).

[8]Gallup Opinion Index, 97, July 1973.

[9]The Harris findings are reported in ANPA Public Affairs Newsletter, 17:3 (January 1977).

[10]Gallup Opinion Index, 134, September 1976.

[11]Roper Organization, Changing Public Attitudes Toward Television and Other Mass Media, 1959-76, Television Information Office (New York, 1977).

[12]The NORC data were made available by the Roper Public Opinion Research Center, Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts. A 1977 Harris Poll (Syracuse Herald-Journal, March 14, p. 12) found 18 per cent of those interviewed expressing confidence in the press. In 1973, the figure for a Harris polls had been 30 per cent. These data suggest a decrease from 1973 to 1977. It is possible the increase in support found by the NORC study was simply missed by Harris, who did not ask the question on the press during the period.

[13]Robert T. Bower, Television and the Public (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973).

[14]Newsweek, November 9, 1970, pp. 22-25. Additional data of this sort are reported in "The Public Appraises the Newspaper: A Report to Client Newspapers of the Gallup Poll on the Credibility of the Press," ANPA News Research Bulletin, No. 2, February, 1974. The most exhaustive study of the relationship between the Nixon administration and the press is by William E. Porter, Assualt on the Media (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1976).

[15]Another irony of the poll findings is that a majority of the people support the press in what is assumed to be one of the press's most controversial activities--protecting the confidentiality of sources. A Gallup poll in late 1972 found that 57 per cent of those sampled said reporters should not be forced to reveal sources in court if the source requested anonymity; only 34 per cent said the reporter should testify about the sources. (Gallup Opinion Index, 90, December 1972).

[16]This isn't to argue there was no variation in the way the various media outlets played the story, particularly in the early days of the scandal. These differences have been recounted by Ben H. Bagdikian, "The Fruits of Agnewism," Columbia Journalism Review, pp. 9-21 (January/February, 1973).

[17]Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, op. cit.

[18]The Harris data are archived at the Institute for Research in Social Science, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The authors acknowledge the assistance of the IRSS staff and Professor Donald L. Shaw of the UNC faculty in compiling these data.

[19]Gallup Opinion Index, 109, July 1974.

[20]The Roper data are archived at the Roper Public Opinion Research Center, Williams College, Williamstown, Mass.

[21]These data were made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political Research, The University of Michigan.

[22]A Gallup poll in early August of 1973, however, found that 88 per cent of the people had watched some of the hearings, either live or on rebroadcast (Gallup Opinion Index, 99, September 1973).

[23]The data were weighted before archiving in the Roper Center, and precise information on the rationale for weighting is no longer available. Indications are, however, the weighting was relatively minor. For the 1973 wave, 10 per cent of the cases were weighted ones. For June 74, the figure is 1 per cent. For August 1974 it is 4 per cent. See Norval D. Glenn, "Trend Studies with Available Survey Data: Opportunities and Pitfalls," in P. Hastings and J. Southwick (eds.) Survey Data for Trend Analysis (Williamstown, Massachusetts: The Roper Public Opinion Research Center, 1974) for a discussion of sample designs in national poll data.

[24]Cramer's V, symmetric correlation coefficient for nominal data, is presented here. This statistic was found to closely match the Pearson correlation coefficient, which is more appropriate for high level analyses.

[25]Because of the large number of respondents used for these analyses, most interpretations rely on the size of the correlation coefficient rather than traditional significance levels as a decision rule. Correlations greater than .10 were considered important. Significance levels are presented in the tables, so readers can make their own interpretations.

[26]Those who thought the media had gone too easily on Nixon also are a type of press critic. Analyses showed that those thinking the media had been too considerate were much like those thinking the media properly balanced in their coverage. The critics thinking the media had been unfair to Nixon stood out as the discrepant group.

[27]In the 1973 data set, support of Nixon was more highly correlated with party than ideology.

[28]The factor structure shown here for the most part parallels the structure reported for somewhat similar items by Jack M. McLeod, Jane D. Brown and Lee B. Becker, "Watergate and the 1974 Congressional Elections," Public Opinion Quarterly, 1977.

Table 1

Criticism of Televising the Senate Hearings (Sept.-Oct. 1973)

I. Sociological Variables		Per Cent Not Wanting Hearings Public	
Socio-Economic Status			
Lower	(N= 230)	20.4	
Lower Middle	(N= 526)	19.8	Cramer's V= .05
Upper Middle	(N= 292)	24.3	Probability of X^2 >.05
Upper	(N= 106)	25.5	
Education			
0-8 Years	(N= 210)	22.4	
9-12 Years	(N= 688)	21.4	Cramer's V= .01
13+ Years	(N= 361)	22.7	Probability of X^2 >.05
Personal Finances Today vs. One Year Ago			
Worse Off	(N= 401)	20.7	
Same	(N= 560)	22.9	Cramer's V= .03
Better Off	(N= 298)	20.8	Probability of X^2 >.05
Age			
18-21	(N= 93)	12.9	
22-29	(N= 242)	16.9	Cramer's V= .10
30-44	(N= 369)	21.4	Probability of X^2 <.05
35-59	(N= 308)	25.0	
60+	(N= 249)	26.1	

Table 1

(continued)

		Per Cent Not Wanting Hearings Public	
Number of New Television Programs Seen			
A Number	(N= 170)	15.3	
Some	(N= 316)	22.5	Cramer's V= .09
Few	(N= 592)	21.6	Probability of $X^2 < .05$
None	(N= 163)	28.8	
II. Psychological Variables			
Feelings About Future			
Pessimistic	(N= 136)	19.9	
Uncertain	(N= 623)	20.1	Cramer's V= .05
Optimistic	(N= 500)	24.4	Probability of $X^2 > .05$
Direction Country is Moving			
Wrong Direction	(N= 945)	20.0	
Don't Know	(N= 107)	24.3	Cramer's V= .08
Right Direction	(N= 199)	29.1	Probability of $X^2 < .05$
Country's Problems Due to Moral Decline			
Generally Agree	(N= 242)	29.3	
Uncertain	(N= 624)	22.4	Cramer's V= .11
Generally Disagree	(N= 395)	15.9	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
III. Political Variables			
Country's Problems Due to Leadership			
Generally Agree	(N= 395)	17.5	
Uncertain	(N= 454)	18.5	Cramer's V= .13
Disagree	(N= 412)	29.4	Probability of $X^2 < .01$

Table 1

(continued)

		Per Cent Not Wanting Hearings Public	
Confidence in Government Leadership			
Not At All Confident	(N= 639)	21.4	
Only Fairly Confident	(N= 534)	20.6	Cramer's V= .07
Very Confident	(N= 81)	32.1	Probability of X^2 > .05
Ideology			
Very Conservative	(N= 97)	30.9	
Moderately Conservative	(N= 426)	28.2	Cramer's V= .17
Middle-Of-The-Road	(N= 364)	21.7	Probability of X^2 < .01
Moderately Liberal	(N= 243)	10.7	
Very Liberal	(N= 62)	14.5	
Party Affiliation			
Republican	(N= 327)	32.4	
Independent	(N= 327)	25.1	Cramer's V= .19
Democrat	(N= 579)	14.3	Probability of X^2 < .01
Support of Nixon			
Strong Supporter	(N= 132)	51.5	
Moderate Supporter	(N= 321)	30.5	Cramer's V= .31
Don't Know	(N= 52)	13.5	Probability of X^2 < .01
Moderate Critic	(N= 363)	16.8	
Strong Critic	(N= 391)	10.2	
TOTAL	(N=1261)	21.7	

Table 2

Criticism of Proposed Televising of Impeachment (June 1974)

I. Sociological Variables		Per Cent Not Wanting Trial Public	
Socio-Economic Status			
Lower	(N= 359)	40.7	
Lower Middle	(N= 796)	48.2	Cramer's V= .06
Upper Middle	(N= 521)	54.1	Probability of $X^2 < .05$
Upper	(N= 258)	50.0	
Education			
0-8 Years	(N= 298)	41.9	
9-12 Years	(N=1063)	50.0	Cramer's V= .06
13+ Years	(N= 604)	49.7	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
Age			
18-21	(N= 194)	35.6	
22-29	(N= 380)	46.6	Cramer's V= .09
30-44	(N= 541)	49.2	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
45-59	(N= 475)	53.9	
60 and Over	(N= 392)	50.3	
II. Psychological Variables			
Satisfaction With Consumer Goods			
Low	(N= 695)	44.3	
Moderate	(N= 677)	50.5	Cramer's V= .05
High	(N= 601)	51.7	Probability of $X^2 > .05$

Table 2

(continued)

III. Political Variables		Per Cent Not Wanting Trial Public	
Satisfaction With Political System			
Needs Fundamental Overhauling	(N= 389)	42.7	
Needs Many Improvements	(N= 562)	44.1	Cramer's V= .11
Don't Know	(N= 54)	44.4	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
Needs Some Improvements	(N= 824)	54.2	
Essentially Good	(N= 153)	52.3	
Ideology			
Very Conservative	(N= 130)	52.3	
Moderately Conservative	(N= 550)	57.5	Cramer's V= .11
Middle-Of-The-Road	(N= 642)	49.4	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
Moderately Liberal	(N= 414)	42.5	
Very Liberal	(N= 138)	31.2	
Party Affiliation			
Republican	(N= 474)	61.2	
Independent	(N= 531)	46.7	Cramer's V= .11
Democrat	(N= 930)	43.1	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
TOTAL	(N=1982)	48.7	

Table 3

Criticism of News Media Coverage of Nixon (June 1974)

I. Sociological Variables		Per Cent Saying Very Unfair	
Socio-Economic Status			
Lower	(N= 360)	22.5	
Lower Middle	(N= 797)	28.2	Cramer's V= .09
Upper Middle	(N= 521)	36.3	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
Upper	(N= 255)	40.4	
Education			
0-8 Years	(N= 300)	31.3	
9-12 Years	(N=1061)	27.7	Cramer's V= .10
13+ Years	(N= 603)	35.5	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
Age			
18-21	(N= 194)	25.3	
22-29	(N= 380)	24.2	Cramer's V= .09
30-44	(N= 539)	27.3	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
45-59	(N= 474)	35.2	
60 and Over	(N= 394)	38.1	
II. Psychological Variables			
Satisfaction With Consumer Goods			
Low	(N= 697)	25.8	
Moderate	(N= 676)	31.8	Cramer's V= .08
High	(N= 599)	34.7	Probability of $X^2 < .01$

Table 3

(continued)

III. Political Variables

Satisfaction With Political System

Needs Fundamental Overhauling	(N= 388)	23.2	
Needs Many Improvements	(N= 563)	26.1	Cramer's V= .13
Don't Know	(N= 56)	17.9	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
Needs Some Improvements	(N= 822)	34.9	
Essentially Good	(N= 152)	46.7	

Ideology

Very Conservative	(N= 128)	43.0	
Moderately Conservative	(N= 552)	42.9	Cramer's V= .14
Middle-Of-The-Road	(N= 641)	29.0	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
Moderately Liberal	(N= 414)	19.6	
Very Liberal	(N= 138)	16.7	

Party Affiliation

Republican	(N= 473)	56.7	
Independent	(N= 530)	27.5	Cramer's V= .24
Democrat	(N= 932)	19.2	Probability of $X^2 < .01$

TOTAL	(N=1981)	30.5

Table 4

Criticism of the Press During Watergate (August 1974)

I. Sociological Variables		Per Cent Saying the Press Looked Bad	
Socio-Economic Status			
Lower	(N= 407)	15.2	
Lower Middle	(N= 868)	25.0	Cramer's V= .09
Upper Middle	(N= 478)	26.6	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
Upper	(N= 163)	35.6	
Education			
0-8 Years	(N= 316)	19.9	
9-12 Years	(N=1024)	24.2	Cramer's V= .04
13+ Years	(N= 610)	27.0	Probability of $X^2 > .05$
Age			
18-21	(N= 182)	18.7	
22-29	(N= 390)	19.7	Cramer's V= .07
30-44	(N= 505)	24.0	Probability of $X^2 < .05$
45-59	(N= 490)	26.1	
60 and Over	(N= 401)	30.2	

Table 4

(continued)

Attention to News Events		Per Cent Saying the Press Looked Bad	
Low	(N= 638)	22.9	
Moderate	(N= 565)	23.9	Cramer's V= .08
High	(N= 668)	26.0	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
II. Psychological Variables			
Optimism About Future			
Low	(N= 294)	21.8	
Moderate	(N= 485)	22.9	Cramer's V= .07
High	(N=1147)	26.2	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
Likelihood of Economic Depression			
Very Likely	(N= 302)	24.8	
Somewhat Likely	(N= 682)	21.4	Cramer's V= .08
Uncertain	(N= 135)	21.5	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
Somewhat Unlikely	(N= 523)	26.6	
Very Unlikely	(N= 305)	28.5	
Per Cent of Charitable Contributions Going to Cause			
About one-fourth	(N= 496)	28.6	
About one-half	(N= 815)	25.4	Cramer's V= .04
About three-fourths	(N= 277)	21.7	Probability of $X^2 > .05$

Table 4

(continued)

III. Political Variables		Per Cent Saying the Press Looked Bad	
Willingness to Run for Public Office			
Not Willing	(N=1092)	23.7	Cramer's V= .02
Willing	(N= 824)	25.4	Probability of $X^2 > .05$
Ideology			
Very Conservative	(N= 151)	39.7	
Moderately Conservative	(N= 608)	32.6	Cramer's V= .15
Middle-Of-The-Road	(N= 559)	22.0	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
Moderately Liberal	(N= 397)	14.6	
Very Liberal	(N= 141)	14.2	
Party Affiliation			
Republicans	(N= 452)	42.3	
Independents	(N= 578)	24.0	Cramer's V= .18
Democrats	(N= 900)	15.3	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
Support of Nixon			
Strong Supporter	(N= 239)	62.8	
Moderate Supporter	(N= 380)	35.5	Cramer's V= .30
Don't Know	(N= 56)	17.9	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
Moderate Critic	(N= 506)	21.1	
Strong Critic	(N= 783)	10.0	

Table 4

(continued)

Seriousness of Charges Against Nixon		Per Cent Saying the Press Looked Bad	
Not at All Serious	(N= 89)	64.0	
Not Too Serious	(N= 260)	50.4	Cramer's V= .26
Don't Know	(N= 64)	12.5	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
Quite Serious	(N= 613)	23.3	
Extremely Serious	(N= 936)	15.2	
Perceived Guilt of Nixon			
Definitely Not Guilty	(N= 53)	69.8	
Probably Not Guilty	(N= 166)	59.0	Cramer's V= .26
Don't Know	(N= 127)	22.8	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
Probably Guilty	(N= 748)	25.5	
Clearly Guilty	(N= 872)	14.4	
Prosecution of Nixon			
Should Not Be Prosecuted	(N= 627)	42.4	
Don't Know	(N= 104)	21.2	Cramer's V= .24
Prosecuted Lightly	(N= 385)	21.8	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
Prosecuted Fully	(N= 849)	12.8	
Feelings About Week of Resignation			
Black Week	(N= 541)	37.7	
Unsure	(N= 511)	24.1	Cramer's V= .17
Bright Week	(N= 904)	16.7	Probability of $X^2 < .01$

Table 4

(continued)

		Per Cent Saying the Press Looked Bad	
Support of Ford			
Strong Supporter	(N= 451)	31.3	
Moderate Supporter	(N= 998)	23.1	Cramer's V= .10
Don't Know	(N= 254)	21.7	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
Moderate Critic	(N= 195)	16.4	
Strong Critic	(N= 56)	32.1	
Perceived Honesty of Ford			
Very Honest	(N= 851)	28.4	
Reasonably Honest	(N= 835)	23.5	Cramer's V= .12
Don't Know	(N= 219)	12.8	Probability of $X^2 < .01$
Not Too Honest	(N= 34)	14.7	
Not at All Honest	(N= 13)	30.8	
TOTAL	(N=1968)	24.4	

Table 5

Criticism of Watergate Principals (August 1974)

	Per Cent Saying Looked Bad and Rank	Factor 1: Investigators*	Factor 2: Parties & Professions	Factor 3: Nixon & Aide
Federal Courts	10.5 (9)	.77	.10	.12
Special Prosecutor Jaworski	8.4 (11)	.76	.21	.00
Senate Watergate Committee	14.9 (8)	.75	.17	-.08
House Judiciary Committee	8.8 (10)	.73	.30	.00
Press	24.4 (5)	.49	.39	-.36
Politicians	29.3 (3)	.12	.77	.13
Democratic Party	16.1 (7)	.35	.71	-.15
Republican Party	37.3 (2)	.04	.59	.50
Legal Profession	21.7 (6)	.37	.52	.17
St. Clair	24.8 (4)	.39	.00	.75
Nixon	69.0 (1)	-.27	.15	.71

* The three factors account for 60.3 per cent of the total variance. The N's for these questions range from 1961 to 1978.

Table 6

Standardized Regression Coefficients for Three Major Political Variables (September-October 1973; August 1974)

	Support of Nixon	Party Affiliation	Ideology	R^2
Rejection of Public Hearings (Sept.-Oct. 1973)	.22 (F= 49.7) (p <.01)	.09 (F= 7.9) (p <.01)	.10 (F= 11.3) (p <.01)	.09 (F= 38.3) (p <.01)
Criticism of the Press During Watergate (Aug. 1974)	.33 (F=201.8) (p <.01)	.08 (F= 18.2) (p <.01)	.09 (F= 12.0) (p <.01)	.17 (F=121.6) (p <.01)